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ANCIENT

WORLD

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# A History of Byzantium

Second Edition

 WILEY-BLACKWELL



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## *The Komnenoi*

250	500	750	1000	1250	1500
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1081	Alexios I Komnenos emperor				
1096	First Crusade reaches Constantinople				
1143	Manuel I emperor				
1185	Death of last emperor of Komnenan dynasty, beginning of collapse of the central state				
1204	Fourth Crusade captures and sacks Constantinople				

## Alexios Komnenos and the First Crusade

Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118) represents that peculiarly Byzantine phenomenon, the emperor who came along just as the situation was at its darkest, who rescued the empire from military disaster, and set it on a course that it was to follow for the next century. The Komnenoi were a military family from Asia Minor who held prominent commands from the beginning of the eleventh century onward. Alexios was the nephew of the emperor Isaac Komnenos and the son of John Komnenos, who had been *domestikos* of the *Scholai*, and Anna Dalassena, who was a member of an aristocratic family (on her mother's side) that had earned military distinctions in East and West over the previous two centuries. Alexios himself had been a general under Michael IV and Nikephoros III, against whom he revolted and seized the throne, at the age of only 24 years. Yet Alexios came to power as a representative of a coalition of aristocratic families: the Komnenoi, the Doukai, the Palaiologoi, and the Melissenoi, and the dynasty of the Komnenoi continued to reflect this aristocratic family alliance in a way that was unprecedented in Byzantine history.

The situation Alexios I found at his accession was certainly not a positive one. Most of Asia Minor had been lost to the Seljuks; the Patzinaks and other local groups were in control of most of the Balkans, and Robert Guiscard and the Normans were preparing to invade Byzantine territories along the Adriatic. Guiscard, it should be remembered, had married his daughter to Michael VII's son, and he used the overthrow of Michael as a pretext to attack Byzantium. Spurious as this claim might be, it could be used by individuals disloyal to the new emperor, and Alexios therefore regarded the Normans as his most serious adversary.

In order to raise a mercenary army Alexios had to pawn the precious vessels of the Byzantine church, and he sought widely for allies against the Normans. The most important of these were the Venetians, the Italian commercial and naval state, which already regarded the Normans as their enemies; this alliance was especially important since the Venetians could supply the naval power that Byzantium now sadly lacked. The Normans attacked Dyrrachium, the main Byzantine city on the Adriatic coast, and they took it in 1081, thus opening Byzantine territory to depredations by the Normans, who reached as far south as Larissa. By a treaty of 1082 the Venetians promised to aid the Byzantines militarily, in return for honors, payments in cash, and most important, the right to trade freely throughout the empire without the imposition of taxes. This important concession was the foundation of Venice's maritime empire. It gave Venetian merchants an advantage over their competitors and seems to

### **Box 12.1 Anna Komnena Writes about her Father**

After describing Alexios' valiant fight and narrow defeat by the Normans under Robert Guiscard in 1082 (at the beginning of his reign), Anna wrote the following, discussing her unique position in describing the deeds of her father.

And truly when writing this, partly from the nature of history and partly because of the extravagance of the events, I forgot that it was my father's deeds that I was describing. In my desire to make my history free from suspicion, I often treat my father's doings in a cursory way, neither amplifying them nor investing them with sentiment. Would that I had been free and released from this love of my father, in order that I might have, as it were, laid hold upon the rich material and shown the license of my tongue, how much at home it is in noble deeds. But now my zeal is hampered by my natural love, for I should not like to afford the public a suspicion that in my eagerness to speak about my relations I am serving them with fairy tales! Indeed very often I recall my father's successes, but I could have wept my life away in tears when recording and describing the many ills that befell him, and it is not without private lamentation and plaint that I quit the subject. But no elegant rhetoric must mar this part of my history, and therefore I pass lightly over my father's misadventures, as if I were an insensible piece of adamant or stone. I ought really to have used them as a form of oath, as the young man does in the Odyssey (for I am not



inferior to him who says “No, by Zeus, Agelaus, and by my father’s sufferings”) and then I should both really be, and be called, a lover of my father. However, let my father’s woes be a subject of marvel and lamentation to me alone, and let us proceed with our history. (*The Alexiad of the Princess Anna Comnena*, trans. E. A. S. Dawes (London, 1928), 4.8, p. 113)

The following is a passage immediately prior to Anna’s claim above, and it describes Alexios’ daring and skill in defeating three Latin horsemen in battle.

... three of the Latins, one of whom was Amicetas already mentioned, the second Peter, son of Aliphas, as he himself asserted, and a third, not a whit inferior to these two, took long spears in their hands and at full gallop dashed at the Emperor. Amicetas missed the Emperor because his horse swerved a little; the second man’s spear the Emperor thrust aside with his sword and then bracing his arm, struck him on the collarbone and severed his arm from his body. Then the third aimed straight at his face, but Alexius being of firm and steadfast mind was not wholly dismayed, but with his quick wit grasped in the flash of an instant the thing to do, and when he saw the blow coming, threw himself backwards on to his horse’s tail. Thus the point of the spear only grazed the skin of his face a little and then, hitting against the rim of the helmet, tore the strap under the chin which held it on and knocked it to the ground. After this the Frank rode past the man he thought he had hurled from his horse, but the latter quickly pulled himself up again in his saddle and sat there calmly without having lost a single weapon. And he still clutched his naked sword in his right hand, his face was stained with his own blood, his head was bare, and his ruddy, gleaming hair was streaming over his eyes and worrying him, for his horse in its fright spurned the reins and by its jumping about tossed his curls in disorder over his face; however, he pulled himself together as much as possible and carried on his resistance to his foes. (*The Alexiad of the Princess Anna Comnena*, trans. E. A. S. Dawes (London, 1928), 4.6, p. 110)

have virtually driven Byzantine merchants from the seas. Meanwhile, in 1082 Robert Guiscard was recalled to Italy, and the Byzantines and their Venetian allies were able to regroup. When Guiscard died in 1085 the Norman threat was, for a time, at an end, although Byzantium would yet again meet the Normans in battle, and the price for Byzantine victory, paid to the Venetians, had indeed been great.

No sooner was the Norman threat deflected than Alexios found himself involved in war with the Patzinaks, who moved against Constantinople and stood before the walls of the city in 1090. They formed an alliance with the Seljuk emir of Smyrna, Tzachas, who besieged Constantinople by sea. During the winter of 1090/1 Constantinople endured a dangerous siege, but in early 1091 Alexios allied with the Cumans, who joined with the imperial army in a battle at Mount Levunion on April 29, when the Patzinaks were nearly completely wiped out.

After this narrow escape Alexios sought to restore Byzantine supremacy in the Balkans. He made a military show in Serbia that resulted in the recognition of Byzantine hegemony, but a revolt of the Cumans prevented the full implementation of the emperor’s plans. In Asia Minor, as in Europe, Byzantine

power was on the increase, aided largely by the fragmentation of the Seljuk sultanate of Rum into squabbling emirates. A Byzantine reconquest of Asia Minor was not impossible and, along with it, the possibility of a Byzantium restored to the position it had held before Mantzikert.

Nonetheless, at this time a new phenomenon fell upon the Byzantine Empire like a whirlwind. This was the crusading movement, something essentially foreign and strange to the Byzantines, but destined to have a powerful impact on Byzantine history from this time onward. On the one hand, the Byzantines had long been aware of western political and military interests in the East, and, with the arrival of the Venetians and the Normans, they saw the kind of military power the westerners could bring. Nonetheless, both the Venetians and the Normans were comprehensible to the Byzantines – they were foreign powers who recognized Byzantine sovereignty and who generally wished to work within the Byzantine system (perhaps, in the case of the Normans, taking it over as their own). But the Crusades were something totally new for the Byzantines. Not that the Byzantines did not accept a connection between religion and war: they certainly saw their army as the strong arm of the Christian God and they understood that the Muslims waged war in the name of Allah. Indeed, there were periods in the Byzantine past where emperors had used religious feeling as a motive for military action. One of these was Herakleios' wars against the Persians, especially after the latter had carried the Holy Cross off to Ctesiphon, and another was at the time of Nikephoros I Phokas' campaigns in Syria and the Holy Land. But none of these were crusades in the western sense, seen primarily as religious responsibilities designed to rid the Holy Land of infidel control and to "return" it to the Christians. Rather, the Crusades were a uniquely western European phenomenon, connected with western concepts of pilgrimage and the universalist claims of the papacy, as well as with the explosive growth of the European economy during the eleventh century and the calls for order and restrictions on war in the West. The fervor that the westerners came to feel for the "recovery" of the Holy Places was something quite foreign to the Byzantines, as were the hordes of peasants, children, and adventurers that descended on the empire as a result of this movement.

It is sometimes said that Alexios I brought the Crusades upon himself with letters to Count Robert of Flanders and Pope Urban II, seeking western military aid in his struggle against the Turks. What Alexios had in mind,

## Box 12.2 The Arrival of the First Crusade in the Byzantine Empire

Anna Komnena also describes her impression of the arrival of the Franks (the western Christians) in Byzantine territory in 1096. On the one hand, Anna looked down on the Franks, whom she generally regarded as morally and spiritually inferior, but on the other she was amazed by the huge size of their armies and their great strength and endurance in battle. Especially interesting in this passage is the way the princess compares the Frankish horde to a swarm of locusts and how, she says, the Byzantine soothsayers interpreted this, to the disadvantage of the Muslim Seljuks in possession of most of Asia Minor.

Before he [the emperor Alexios Komnenos] had enjoyed even a short rest, he heard a report of the approach of innumerable Frankish armies. Now he dreaded their arrival for he knew their irresistible manner of attack, their unstable and mobile character and all the peculiar natural and concomitant characteristics which the Frank retains throughout; and he also knew that they were always agape for money, and seemed to disregard their truces readily for any reason that cropped up. For he had always heard this reported of them, and found it very true. However, he did not lose heart, but prepared himself in every way so that, when the occasion called, he would be ready for battle. And indeed the actual facts were far greater and more terrible than rumour made them. For the whole of the West and all the barbarian tribes which dwell between the further side of the Adriatic and the pillars of Heracles, had all migrated in a body and were marching into Asia through the intervening Europe, and were making the journey with all their household. The reason of this upheaval was more or less the following. A certain Frank, Peter by name, nicknamed Cucupeter [Peter of the Cowl], had gone to worship at the Holy Sepulchre and after suffering many things at the hands of the Turks and Saracens who were ravaging Asia, he got back to his own country with difficulty. But he was angry at having failed in his object, and wanted to undertake the same journey again. However, he saw that he ought not to make the journey to the Holy Sepulchre alone again, lest worse things befall him, so he worked out a cunning plan. This was to preach in all the Latin countries that “the voice of God bids me announce to all the Counts in France that they should all leave their homes and set out to worship at the Holy Sepulchre, and to endeavour wholeheartedly with hand and mind to deliver Jerusalem from the hand of the Hagarenes” [“the descendants of Hagar,” used by the Byzantines as a synonym for Arabs or, occasionally, any Muslims)]. And he really succeeded. For after inspiring the souls of all with this quasi-divine command he contrived to assemble the Franks from all sides, one after the other, with arms, horses and all the other paraphernalia of war. And they were all so zealous and eager that every highroad was full of them. And those Frankish soldiers were accompanied by an unarmed host more numerous than the sand or the stars, carrying palms and crosses on their shoulders; women and children, too, came away from their countries. And the sight of them was like many rivers streaming from all sides, and they were advancing towards us through Dacia generally with all their hosts. Now the coming of these many peoples was preceded by a locust which did not touch the wheat, but made a terrible attack on the vines. This was really a presage as the diviners of the time interpreted it, and meant that this enormous Frankish army would, when it came, refrain from interference in Christian affairs, but fall very heavily upon the barbarian Ishmaelites who were slaves to drunkenness, wine, and Dionysus. For this race is under the sway of Dionysus and Eros, rushes headlong into all kind of sexual intercourse, and is not circumcised either in the flesh or in their passions. It is nothing but a slave, nay triply enslaved, to the ills wrought by Aphrodite. For this reason they worship and adore Astarte and Ashtaroth too and value above all the image of the moon, and the golden figure of Hobar in their country. Now in these symbols Christianity was

taken to be the corn because of its wineless and very nutritive qualities; in this manner the diviners interpreted the vines and the wheat. However let the matter of the prophecy rest. (*The Alexiad of the Princess Anna Comnena*, trans. E. A. S. Dawes (London, 1928), 10.5, pp. 248–9)

without doubt, was the dispatch of mercenaries or a military alliance of the kind that Byzantium had long used in its dealings with enemies. Pope Urban, however, at a council in Clermont in 1095, called for a mass movement, under the direction of the papacy, to reconquer Jerusalem, which had fallen to the Seljuks in 1077. Rather surprisingly, the call was enthusiastically received, both by members of the western aristocracy, and by simple lay people, some of whom joined an unscrupulous leader called Peter the Hermit and set off for the Holy Land before the nobles were ready to march. This group, without good leadership and short of supplies, plundered and looted its way through Hungary and the Balkans, arriving in August of 1096 in Constantinople. After attempts to control them failed, the emperor shipped them over to Asia Minor, where most of them were slaughtered by the Turks.

**Map 12.1** The Byzantine Empire of the Komnenoi (from *The Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 4, map 5)



Later in the same year, the noble leaders of the First Crusade began to appear in Constantinople, notable among them Godfrey of Bouillon, Raymond of Toulouse, and Bohemond, the son of the Norman Robert Guiscard. Alexios demanded that the Crusaders pledge their fealty to him in an oath based on western precedent, and most of them did so. Raymond of Toulouse refused, but a

compromise was ultimately found in which both Alexios and Raymond promised to respect the life and honor of the other. Alexios, although he certainly had not welcomed the Crusaders, at least sought to control their independence and to guarantee, as best he could, that any territory captured by them would be returned to Byzantine control.

In the spring of 1097 the Crusaders crossed over into Asia Minor, supported by promises of assistance from the emperor, who advised them to seek an alliance with the Armenians. The Crusaders outmaneuvered and defeated a large force the Turks brought out against them and the road across Asia Minor was open to them. The focus of Byzantine expectations was Antioch, since it was the key to the defense of the Euphrates frontier and a city rich with Byzantine associations. The Crusaders ultimately reached Antioch and besieged the city, where they ran into considerable difficulty. Alexios set off himself to relieve the Crusaders, but he ultimately turned back. The Crusaders, however, finally took the city in June of 1098. Rather than surrendering it to the Byzantines, the Crusaders pointed out that Alexios had let them down at a critical moment, and Bohemond seized the city in his own name. Byzantine hopes of a restoration of the empire's fortunes in the East were seen to be false.

Now under the command of Raymond of Toulouse, the Crusaders moved on toward Jerusalem. Raymond, despite his refusal to do obeisance to the emperor, turned over several Syrian ports to Byzantium, while other Crusaders set up principalities of their own in captured territory. Jerusalem fell to the Crusaders on July 15, 1099, but Raymond was disappointed in his hope for reward, as Godfrey of Bouillon was made King of Jerusalem and Defender of the Holy Sepulchre. The Crusader occupation of parts of the Holy Land had begun.

Raymond of Toulouse remained on good terms with Alexios, and he helped the emperor deal with a new group of Crusaders who arrived in Constantinople in 1100. Alexios, however, still seethed at Bohemond's seizure of Antioch and – after the Norman rejected Alexios' demand that he surrender the city – the emperor sent an expeditionary force to Syria in hopes of isolating the city and forcing its submission. Bohemond came to see Byzantium as the main threat to his interests in the East, and, leaving his nephew Tancred in charge of Antioch, he went to the West to prepare an invasion of Byzantine Albania, designed to force Alexios to cease his pressure in Syria. In preparation for this Bohemond circulated reports hostile to Alexios and the Byzantines, making use of the stereotypes that the Byzantines were effete and treacherous and claiming that Christians had an obligation to overthrow the schismatic emperor. Bohemond



gained the support of Pope Paschal II for his undertaking and the invasion began in 1107. Although successful at first, Bohemond soon found himself hemmed in, for Alexios recalled his best troops from the East to oppose the Norman danger. In the end a treaty was drawn up in 1108 in which Bohemond was left in control of Antioch, but he recognized that he held it as a liegeman of Alexios; and the Normans agreed to recognize the suzerainty of both Alexios and his successor, John Komnenos. In a broader sense, the claims of Bohemond had the effect of spreading the belief in the West that the Byzantines were uncooperative in the crusading effort and hardly better than the Muslims; this, of course, came relatively soon after the split between the churches in 1054 and it supported the claims of the papacy that the Christianity of the Byzantines was suspect.

Alexios had managed to deflect the Norman threat and to maintain his claim of suzerainty over most of the Christian East. This claim, however, was without much practical worth and it was bought at the expense of a near-abandonment of Byzantine interests in central Anatolia, where the Seljuks were essentially allowed to maintain and strengthen their holdings. Even in Syria, Tancred was able to take advantage of the disappearance of Byzantine military pressure to secure his control of Antioch, and Alexios was thus moved to seek a military alliance with the Seljuk sultan in Baghdad against the city. This ultimately accomplished nothing but served to confirm Bohemond's propaganda that the Byzantines were willing to conspire with the Turks against Christian interests. Alexios certainly did realize the central importance of Asia Minor, and his generals managed to secure control of much of its western coast. In 1111 the emperor made a serious excursion into central Asia Minor, and he managed to obtain the submission of the Seljuks, although Alexios also agreed to the evacuation of the Greek population from the area, something that was to contribute to the long-term ethnic change in the area.

Alexios Komnenos had a long and militarily successful reign. He rescued the Byzantine state from the threat of imminent dissolution. He faced a series of serious military threats, and, through a combination of diplomacy, personal cunning, and his own military ability, he generally emerged the victor. By the time of his death Byzantium was once again the most powerful state in the eastern Mediterranean. But Alexios had accomplished this by changing some of the basic structures of the Byzantine state, or – perhaps better – he had created new institutions and personal arrangements that replaced the institutions that had characterized Byzantium until that time.

In economic terms, Alexios found himself seriously strapped for cash,

especially in the early years of his reign. As mentioned above, he resorted to the expedient of seizing and melting down church vessels, and in the early part of his reign he continued the devaluation of the coins. Around 1092 he was able to restore the value of the coinage and strike a *hyperperon* (as the gold coin was now called) of 21 carats, only somewhat less than the gold before the devaluation of the past century. Hostile critics (such as the historian Zonaras) describe his rapacity and significant increases in taxes, including the introduction of corvée labor. Tax farming had by this time become the norm, and the burden was thus increasingly heavy, but it is difficult to know how to judge Alexios' overall economic policy.

The income realized by these measures was, of course, largely sought for the purchase of mercenaries in order to strengthen the empire's defense. Nonetheless, Alexios also tried to increase the participation of native soldiers in the Byzantine army. The peasant militias were, of course, long a thing of the past, and the military practices of the time demanded the participation of heavily armed, mounted soldiers, who could only come from the ranks of the wealthy. Thus, Alexios tried to tie the system of *pronoia* closely to the responsibility to supply soldiers for the imperial army. What was previously a rather loose and inconsistent system was now connected regularly with the expectation that a *pronoiar* would appear, fully armed, for military service, and that, depending on the size of his grant of land, he would be accompanied by a levy of similarly armed troops. As with the beginnings of the *pronoia* system, this modification has frequently been compared or connected to the institution of western feudalism, although, once again, a primary difference is that, under the Komnenoi, the sovereign power of the state was still maintained, at least in theory.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Alexios' policy was his treaty with the Venetians (1082), followed by similar concessions to Pisa (1111), and his virtual surrender of trade to the Italian merchants. This has been seen by some historians as a fatal mistake that ultimately ruined the Byzantine economy. Others have pointed out that Italian merchants already had the greatest share of Byzantine trade and that there was little the emperor could have done about it anyway, while still others have argued that the significant evidence of prosperity in the twelfth-century empire is proof that the economic strength of Byzantium was hardly destroyed. One theory along these lines is that, while Venetian ships carried the bulk of international transport in the twelfth century, this did not hurt the business of Byzantine traders, who still controlled the bulk of commerce,

from port to port, within the empire, and that the increased access to long-distance trade of the Venetians did not harm the Byzantine economy but rather stimulated it to greater production and consumption. The state, however, can hardly have shared in the benefits of any such improvement in the economy as a whole, which must have been split between the foreign merchants and the Byzantine aristocracy.

Overall, the weight of the evidence seems to tip in the direction of the latter interpretations. The economy of Byzantium changed in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, but this was not necessarily for the worse. One should remember that this same period witnessed significant changes in the economy of western Europe that led, in the view of most historians, to the economic and even political systems of the modern era. Many of the same forces were operating in Byzantium at this time. One sees, for example, the very clear increase in the construction of monumental buildings, most especially churches, many of them decorated with expensive programs of mosaics and marble. The system of *pronoia* and the condition of the peasants, of course, are elements that deserve broader consideration, and will be discussed further at the end of this chapter.

The reign of Alexios I was also marked by changes within the administrative structure of the state. Most important was his dependence on family connections. Thus, he ruled the empire less on the basis of the traditional political and bureaucratic system and more as a personal and family possession. As mentioned, he came to power largely as representative of a coalition of several of the aristocratic families, and this affected the way he viewed his power and the state overall.

Alexios' family connections need to be examined in some detail. He himself was the nephew of Isaac Komnenos, first member of the military aristocracy to rule Byzantium, and he had married Irene Doukaina in 1078, before coming to the throne. Irene was the daughter of Andronikos Doukas, a nephew of Constantine X and a cousin of Michael VII, while her mother was Maria of Bulgaria, granddaughter of Vladislav, the last independent tsar of Bulgaria, defeated by Basil II in 1018. Alexios' mother, Anna Dalassena, was a remarkable woman, whose strength of character was displayed by keeping her own family name even after marriage and by the influence and power she wielded during the reign of her son. Indeed, immediately after his accession Alexios had his mother crowned as *augusta* (empress) rather than his wife, and relations between the two women were often strained. During Alexios' frequent

absence from Constantinople on military campaigns Anna regularly acted as regent, and she assumed responsibility for raising and educating Anna Komnena, her granddaughter and namesake, the imperial couple's eldest child, and author of the *Alexiad*.

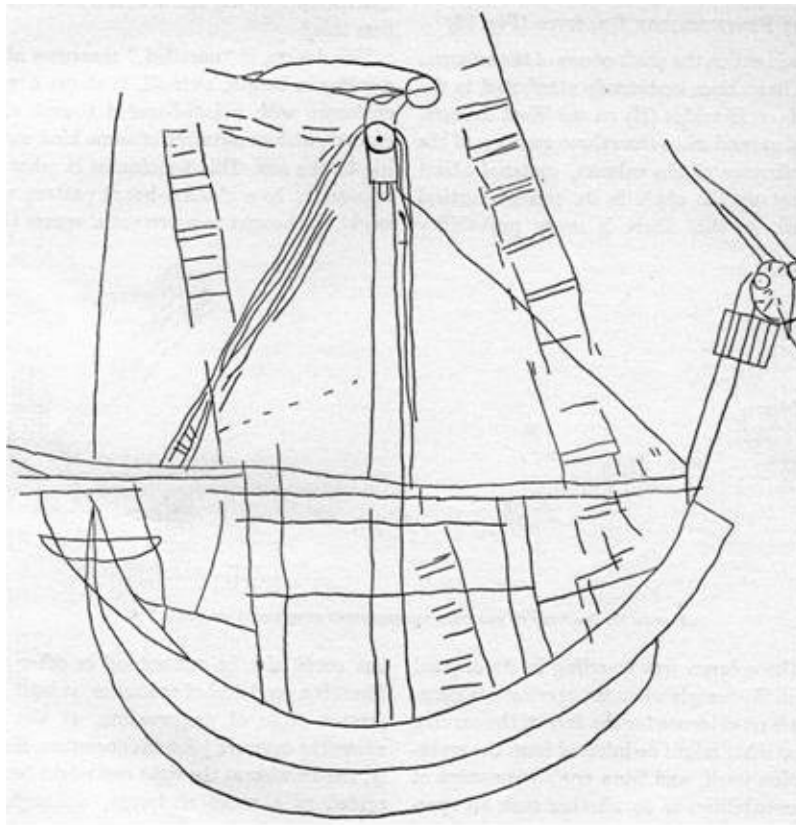
In fact, relations among the strong women in the court of Alexios is a matter of considerable historical and social interest, some of it revealed in the writings of Anna herself. The situation was certainly complicated by the presence of Maria of Alania in the imperial palace. Maria was princess of Georgia and had been successively the wife of Michael VII Doukas and Nikephoros III Votaniates, but in 1081 she joined in the alliance to support Alexios in his quest for the throne. Rumor had it that she was Alexios' mistress. Further, Alexios named Maria's son Constantine Doukas as his co-emperor and heir to the throne and he was betrothed to Anna Komnena, although Alexios later bypassed him in favor of his own son John (born in 1087). And, in the end, Alexios and Irene Doukaina had a total of nine children, all of whom held high imperial office or were married to individuals of high status. The story of this imperial family and its interactions should certainly appeal to contemporary filmmakers and television series producers.

In the face of nearly constant conspiracy, Alexios felt the need to depend on people he could trust so the emperor relied on governors, administrators, and generals who were either members of his own family or were related to his family in a personal way. Thus, instead of seeking to neutralize the power of the existing aristocratic families, he worked to co-opt them into his own system of family connections. This approach clearly worked under Alexios himself and it was not a system that was necessarily ineffective or bad for the state, but it necessarily undermined the old bureaucratic system and could tend, in periods when the emperor himself was not personally strong, to encourage decentralization or even loss of central governmental control. Politics and political relationships had become largely personalized.

In this context the old imperial administration changed significantly and the old titles generally lost their meaning. Thus, many of the old titles essentially disappeared, while new and often high-sounding ones were created. For example, the imperial titles of *caesar*, *nobilissimus*, and *kouropalates* survived but were diminished in rank, while the new title of *Sebastokrator*, created by Alexios for his brother Isaac, was superior to all three. Other high-sounding titles were formed by the combination of earlier honors, such as the *protonobilissimos* or *protonobilissimohypertatos*. As the old *theme* army disappeared, the office of

*strategos* disappeared as well and the governor of a *theme* was a *dux* and his assistant a *katepan*. The commander of the army was styled the *megas domestikos*, the commander of the fleet the *megas dux*, and the controller of the civil service was the *logothetes ton sekreton*, often known simply as the grand logothete.

**Figure 12.1** Graffito of a ship from Korinth. Graffiti, both letters and drawings, are often found scratched on the walls of Byzantine buildings. Sometimes these were prayers or curses but ships seem to have been a real favorite and different kinds of ships can often be discerned, suggesting that the persons who scratched them on the surface had a particular boat in mind. The ship depicted here is relatively small, with a sail and a round bottom, a well-known Byzantine type. Many of these ship graffiti may have been votives, silent prayers, probably to protect a sailor a traveler on a sea journey. Robert Scranton, *Corinth 16: Medieval Architecture in the Central Area of Corinth* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), fig. 14, p. 138, graffito of a round-bottomed boat. Reproduced with permission from the Trustees of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.



However one eventually regards Alexios Komnenos, his reign marked an important turning point, or at least a milestone, in Byzantine history. As



mentioned above the emperor sought to deal with a variety of enormous problems, involving the military weakness brought on by imperial policy of the middle years of the eleventh century, the rise in economic and military power of the medieval West, and the social and economic changes in Byzantine society that took place in that period. Many scholars, such as P. Lemerle, admitted that Alexios saved the empire from imminent disillusion, but claimed that he did so by cutting short the liberal developments that brought about enormous changes in the contemporary West. Instead, in this view, the Byzantine Empire reverted to a despotism that stifled all change. The pages that follow, we think, fail to support such a view, but show that the empire of the Komnenoi was one that dealt admirably with the dominant issues of the day – including the challenge from the West – in part by an openness to the forces of the time.

## **John II Komnenos (1118–1143)**

In his last years Alexios I apparently lost some of his power of command, and his wife Irene Doukaina and his daughter Anna conspired to secure the succession of Anna's husband, the caesar Nikephoros Vryennios (whom Anna had married in 1097). Alexios' son John II Komnenos (1118–43) ultimately prevailed, in part because Vryennios failed to join in the plot and served the new emperor loyally the rest of his life. Nonetheless, the reign of John Komnenos was marked by continued conspiracy, frequently instigated by members of his own family. Conspiracies were not uncommon throughout all of Byzantine history, but to a certain extent John's problems were the result of Alexios I's policy of basing much of his power on the members of his family. While the emperor remained the figurehead and the theoretical center of power, as we have mentioned, he had become in fact the leader of an alliance of members of the imperial family. John Komnenos sought to end this system and he turned for support to personal servants well outside the circle of the court itself. Most notable of these was John Axoukh, a slave of Turkish origin who had been captured by the Crusaders and given to the emperor in Constantinople, where he grew up as John II's childhood companion. John II named him as *megas domestikos* (supreme commander of the army) and entrusted him with most matters of importance at court and in the field. The emperor forced members of the imperial family to swear allegiance to Axouch, who was able to assist him in the suppression of opposition at court.

Freed, to a certain degree at least, of the interference of his family, John was

able to turn his attention to foreign and military affairs, which were pressing on a variety of fronts. Probably his first priority was to deal with the situation in Asia Minor, and John campaigned there in 1119 and 1120 with some success. His attention, however, was attracted elsewhere when the Patzinaks, who had been quiet for 30 years since their defeat by Alexios, broke into the Balkans in 1122. John responded by offering their leaders gifts, while at the same time attacking their forces camped near Veroë (modern Stara Zagora in Bulgaria). The battle was closely fought, but the daring of the Varangian mercenaries won the day and the Byzantines were completely successful. John had become closely involved with Hungary as a result of his marriage to a Hungarian princess, and Byzantine interests on the Danube were dependent on good relations with that country. Nonetheless, beginning in 1128, he had to fight the Hungarians on several occasions in order to maintain the status quo. John's dealings with the Serbs were somewhat more mixed, but Serbia still remained essentially within the Byzantine sphere.

**Figure 12.2** Mosaic of John II Komnenos and his wife Eirene, dated 1122, from the eastern wall of the southern gallery of Hagia Sophia. The emperor and empress are shown presenting gifts to the Virgin and Christ-child. The emperor holds a bag of money and the empress a scroll which undoubtedly contains the details of the gift; around each are their official titles. The figures are depicted with considerable realism: Eirene, in particular, with her blond plaited hair and rosy cheeks, a reminder that she was the daughter of King Ladislaus I of Hungary. Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



The disappearance of the Norman threat meant that the empire was much less in need of naval help from Venice and John resented the audacity of the

Venetians, who often acted against Byzantine interests. John therefore at first refused to ratify the privileged position granted to the Venetians by his father. Until 1124 the Venetians were occupied elsewhere, but afterwards they turned their attention to Byzantium, attacking the coastline of Asia Minor as well as the island of Kefalonia. In 1126 John decided that he could not fight the Venetians and at the same time carry out his plans to restore Byzantine power in Asia Minor, and he once again ratified Venetian trading privileges.

As a result of the agreement with Venice and victories in the Balkans, John II was finally able to turn his attention to Asia Minor in the period after 1130. Like his father, John's policy had two goals: the recovery of Antioch and the Euphrates frontier, and the restoration of Byzantine control over central Anatolia. Asia Minor at this time was divided between the Seljuk sultanate of Rum, with its center at Ikonion (Konya), which controlled the central part of the peninsula, and the Danishmends, who ruled northeastern Asia Minor, with centers at Amasia and Sivas. At this time the Danishmends were very much in the ascendancy, and John waged a series of campaigns against them, unfortunately with little result. He next turned his attention to Cilicia and the territory around Antioch, where the Armenians and the Crusaders had extended their territory at Byzantine expense. Beginning about 1136, John quickly restored Byzantine control of Cilicia and approached Antioch in 1137, where the city was in a difficult situation due to pressure from both the Danishmends and the Muslim forces of Mosul. Raymond of Poitiers, who had just become prince of Antioch, did homage to John and promised to respect Byzantine territory and to cooperate with the emperor in military campaigns. Aided by his Crusader allies, John campaigned in Syria, impressing his opponents with Byzantine power but accomplishing little of a practical nature. His demand that Antioch be turned over to him was frustrated by a popular revolt in the city, and the emperor returned to Constantinople, victorious almost everywhere but with little to show for his effort.

By the 1130s Byzantine foreign policy had to take account of increased Norman power under Roger II (ruled 1105–54), who had managed to unite all Norman territories in southern Italy and Sicily. Aware that the Normans would soon again become interested in Byzantium, John sought an alliance with the German emperors, whose own interests in Italy made them regard the Normans as enemies – and the Byzantines thus as potential allies. Agreement was made, first with the emperor Lothair, and then, after 1138, with Conrad III. This alliance was cemented in 1140 by an agreement for the marriage of Bertha of

Sulzbach, sister-in-law of Conrad III, to Manuel Komnenos, the younger son of John II (the marriage did not take place until 1145, after Manuel had become emperor). The emperor felt that Byzantium's future lay in such broad alliances, with the Franks in the West, as well as those in the Levant, and that with this aid he would be able to deal with problems in the Balkans and Asia Minor.

In 1140 John campaigned against the Turks in Asia Minor and prepared yet another offensive against Antioch and the East. Setting off in 1142, John moved speedily through Asia Minor, secured the support of Edessa, and stood before the walls of Antioch. Raymond played for time but ultimately refused to surrender the city. John decided to withdraw to Cilicia for the winter before pressing the siege of the city. In the spring of 1143, however, he was accidentally injured while hunting and died, thus leaving his greatest ambitions and the tasks he had worked at for so long unfulfilled – but presumably well within the grasp of his successor.

## **Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180)**

John's younger son, Manuel I (1143–80), had already distinguished himself as a competent soldier and a good leader. Probably for this reason, John II ignored normal Byzantine practice and designated Manuel as his heir, passing over his elder son Isaac as he did so. Not surprisingly, there was some doubt about the succession, all the more so since Manuel was proclaimed in Cilicia while his brother was at home in Constantinople. Individuals loyal to Manuel, however, managed to neutralize opposition before it developed and Manuel was welcomed to the city and even reconciled with his brother, who accepted the *fait accompli*.

Once secure on the throne Manuel I attempted to carry out the military plans of his father. In 1144 he sent a joint land and sea expedition against Cilicia and Syria, which met with some success, and in 1146 he attacked Konya (Ikonion), the seat of the Seljuk sultanate, and again he was reasonably successful, although his siege of Konya was abandoned after a half-hearted attempt.

Meanwhile, a new force gathered on the Byzantine horizon: the Second Crusade. The sentiment of the Byzantines at this moment can easily be gathered from the text of Anna Komnena's *Alexiad*, which was being completed at just this time: in the Byzantine view the goal of the Crusaders, from beginning to end, was not the recovery of the Holy Land, but the conquest of the Byzantine Empire. Manuel learned of plans for a new crusade and he immediately began

diplomatic communication designed to safeguard Byzantine interests as best he could. In 1146 he wrote to Pope Eugenius III, suggesting that the same arrangements in force for the First Crusade be maintained for the Second – namely that the commanders of the Crusade should swear obedience to the emperor and that they should return former Byzantine possessions to the empire. Manuel also established contacts with the French king Louis VII, and continued his diplomatic relations with the German emperor Conrad III. One of Manuel's main goals, of course, was the neutralization of Roger II of Sicily, whom the Byzantines regarded as the most dangerous of the western powers. These negotiations met with considerable success and Roger II was excluded from the Crusade, but, rather surprisingly and in marked contrast to the First Crusade, Conrad III took the cross himself, along with many of his subordinates. This was the first time a major western ruler had taken part in a crusade and it gave the movement a German, rather than a French, flavor, even though Louis VII joined Conrad in the expedition.

The Crusaders arrived quickly, the German contingent reaching Constantinople in 1147. Manuel was very suspicious of Conrad's military intent, even though Conrad was the brother-in-law of the emperor's wife, Bertha of Sulzbach, and he quickly shipped the westerners over to Asia Minor. Although the Crusaders expected opposition only when they reached the Holy Land, they immediately met the armed resistance of the Turks settled in Asia Minor; the Germans were defeated and their army turned back toward Constantinople, where they met up with the French contingent at Nicaea. From this point on the French took the initiative and Manuel arranged to have a fleet carry most of the army to Antioch, thus bypassing all of Asia Minor. Conrad returned to Constantinople, where he was warmly entertained by the emperor. An agreement was made whereby the remainder of the German army, minus the emperor, was sent in Byzantine ships to Acre. Once in the Holy Land, the remnants of the crusading army met with dismal failure and the Second Crusade accomplished nothing.

Manuel I, however, must certainly have been pleased with his success in handling the Crusaders; they had passed through Byzantine territory with little harm to Byzantium. He exploited the differences between the Germans and the French to his own advantage, and he emerged with Byzantine power unscathed. To the westerners, nonetheless, and even to some Byzantine observers, Manuel had treated the Crusaders shamefully; he had failed to appreciate what they thought was a noble goal but had looked to the narrow interests of the Byzantine



state. Thus, in the mind of many westerners Manuel's actions were unconscionable and he was judged to be largely responsible for the failure of the Crusade. To be fair to Manuel, as has already been pointed out, the Byzantines never understood the crusading ideal and they regarded the interests of "Christendom" as identical with the those of the Byzantine state. These different perceptions were at the heart of differing perceptions of the Crusades and the role of the emperor at the time of the Second Crusade, and they were to have an important influence in growing anti-Byzantine sentiment in the West.

Meanwhile, Roger II chafed at his exclusion from the Crusade, and in 1147 he used the opportunity to attack and plunder the Greek cities of Thebes, Korinth, and Athens, carrying off to Sicily much wealth and the Jewish silkweavers who had made Greece the center of silk production in the Christian world; he also conquered and held the island of Kerkyra (Corfu) in the Adriatic. In 1148 Conrad and Manuel made an alliance against the Norman kingdom, and Conrad pledged to hand over southern Italy to the Byzantines, as a dowry for Manuel's German wife. In 1147 Manuel began preparations for a strike against the Normans, and, realizing the importance of a strong military presence, he renewed Venetian trading privileges within the empire and secured Venetian support for an attack on Kerkyra, since the Venetians naturally regarded the Norman presence there as a threat to their own interests. A long and difficult siege followed, during which the Byzantines and the Venetians quarreled, and Roger sought to divert the allies' attention by sending a Norman fleet into the Aegean and by encouraging the Serbs and Hungarians to attack Byzantine territory. In 1149, however, the Normans surrendered Kerkyra to the emperor and Manuel subdued the Serbs and Hungarians, returning to Constantinople in triumph.

Manuel planned to use this victory as a springboard for the recovery of southern Italy and Sicily, and he continued to press Conrad to honor his promise in this regard, but the plans came to nothing in the short run, and Conrad died in 1152. In 1154, however, Roger II also died, and the weakness in Sicily and the ambitions of the new German emperor, Frederick Barbarossa, gave the Byzantines an opportunity for action in Italy. Manuel had also arranged an alliance with the papacy, under Pope Hadrian IV, since the popes were always afraid of the Normans and hoped that the alliance might ultimately result in the submission of the Byzantine church to Rome. Under the command of John Axoukh and with the cooperation of Michael Palaiologos and John Doukas, Byzantine forces secured the surrender of Bari in 1155, along with a number of

other coastal towns. An attack on Brindisi failed in 1156, and any immediate attempt at a reconquest of southern Italy came to a halt, but the Byzantines had shown that they could carry the war to Norman territory and that they could still hope to maintain a Byzantine protectorate in Italy. Ultimately, in 1158, Manuel came to terms with William I, the new Norman king of Sicily, probably because by this time Frederick Barbarossa had become alarmed at Byzantine success in the peninsula, and the Byzantine emperor now saw the Norman king as an ally rather than an enemy.

Meantime, virtually all the Crusader states in the East acknowledged at least the theoretical supremacy of Byzantium, and in 1159 Manuel made a ceremonial entrance into Antioch mounted on his horse, while the Latin king of Jerusalem and the prince of Antioch followed in his train. Manuel had, it seemed, finally solved the problem that the Crusades had caused for Byzantium.

In Hungary Manuel was equally successful, and he intervened in disputes about the succession to the throne, allowing him to consider the possibility of annexing the country once and for all. A treaty of 1164, drawn up with the assistance of the king of Bohemia, gave the emperor considerable influence and eventually led to the subjugation of Croatia, Bosnia, and much of Serbia to the Byzantine Empire by 1167. Manuel even considered the possibility of marrying his daughter to the Hungarian prince Bela, to whom he would eventually leave the empire. Dissension, however, broke out in Serbia, about 1166 or 1167, under the leadership of Stefan Nemanja, who rebelled against the empire but was defeated and paraded through the streets of Constantinople in 1172.

Byzantine success in foreign relations ironically had a long-term negative effect, in part because it irritated or neutralized many of Byzantium's allies and raised fears in the West. Especially significant was the fact that there was no real hope of accommodation with the papacy, whose power had grown enormously throughout Europe. Also important was the enmity with Frederick I, who opened negotiations with Kilij Arslan, the sultan of Rum. Venice, long Byzantium's main ally in the West, had grown fearful as a result of the display of Byzantine power in Italy, along the Dalmatian coast, and in Hungary. Manuel sought to ally Byzantium with Genoa and Pisa, the other Italian naval powers, and in 1171 open conflict broke out with Venice. On March 12 all Venetians within the empire and their ships and goods were seized, resulting in Venetian attacks on Byzantine territory.

In 1176 Manuel moved again against the sultanate of Rum, and the two armies met at Myriokephalon in the mountains of Phrygia on September 17 (Map 9.1).

The Byzantine forces were surrounded by the Turks and almost completely annihilated. The Battle of Myriokephalon was a disaster on a level with that of Mantzikert a century earlier. Despite his earlier successes, Manuel's foreign policy completely disintegrated after 1176, especially in the face of the obvious success of the Turks in Asia Minor.

In economic terms the situation was just as dark, in large part because Manuel's foreign adventures had been expensive and without much in the way of immediate return. Manuel sought to settle foreigners in Byzantine territory, in much the way his father had done, in the hope of making them into soldiers, but the bulk of the army remained mercenary. The state, by this time, had become thoroughly militarized, and military men dominated virtually all aspects of the government, with a detrimental effect on society as a whole.

Manuel was himself, however, a great patron of art. He commissioned the paintings in the *trapeza* (refectory) of the monastery of St. Mokios in Constantinople that depicted his ancestors, and similar paintings in the Blachernai and Great Palace also provided excellent examples of an attempt to use art as political and dynastic propaganda. Despite his political and military opposition to the West, Manuel was a great admirer of western culture, and he imitated western court manners, ceremonies, and even feudal jousts and knightly contests.

The reign of Manuel Komnenos was, therefore, a significant point in the history of the empire, and it was here that the policies and structures of his grandfather Alexios I were tried and ultimately found wanting. This was certainly not because these policies were inherently flawed or because they were based so heavily on the support of the landed military aristocracy (and especially members of his own family). Nor was the problem necessarily the autocratic tendencies of Manuel. Indeed, in this regard Byzantium of the time resembled many of the contemporary monarchies of the West, including that of England, Sicily, the Hohenstaufen (German) Empire, and the kingdom of Jerusalem. Indeed, Manuel succeeded rather well at fitting Byzantium into the military patterns and expectations of the West, and his success allowed him to contemplate, like Byzantine emperors before and after him, the reconquest of at least a part of the empire's western possessions. This, of course, never happened, and Manuel's focus on the West caused him to neglect the military danger of the East (i.e., the Seljuks) and the rise of local leaders in the heart of the empire (Philadelphia in Asia Minor and Nafplion and Monemvasia in Greece) who acted essentially independently of Constantinople. In the end, Manuel's

involvement in the western affairs stretched the military and diplomatic resources of the empire beyond what they could bear and led to a weakening of the central Byzantine state.

## **Andronikos Komnenos (1183–1185) and the Collapse of Central Authority**

Manuel I had been married twice, first (as we have seen) to Bertha of Sulzbach and, after her death, to Maria of Antioch, the daughter of Raymond of Poitiers, in 1161. At Manuel's death in 1180 their son, Alexios II, was only 12 years old, and Maria assumed the regency, selecting as her agent Alexios Komnenos, a nephew of Manuel I. Maria remained unpopular in Constantinople, in part because of her western sympathies, and there were several unsuccessful attempts to overthrow the regime, led largely by disgruntled members of the Komnenan family. Ultimately the throne was seized by Andronikos I Komnenos (1183–5), a cousin of Manuel I and his opposite in many ways. While Manuel had supported the military aristocracy and a pro-western policy, Andronikos was an enemy of the aristocracy and strongly opposed a policy based on good relations with the western powers. His revolt, in 1181, gained strength quickly and, when Andronikos' troops reached Chalcedon, a revolt broke out in Constantinople which resulted in a brutal massacre of the Latins in the city (in May 1182).

Andronikos entered the city in triumph, arranged for the imprisonment or execution of his rivals, and was crowned co-emperor along with young Alexios II in September 1183. The young emperor was eventually murdered, and Andronikos ruled in his own name. The new emperor (he was then 65 years old) made a determined attempt to root out all the evils that beset the state, using whatever means he could to stop corruption and curtail the power of the aristocracy. His methods were often brutal, but generally successful: he is reputed to have said that corrupt officials must "cease either from ill-doing or from living." This application of state power had a generally favorable effect on the Byzantine citizenry, who were released from the worst abuses of the past.

Andronikos had few allies among the aristocracy, especially among the Komnenoi, although some of the Doukai supported him. The landed aristocracy did not generally cooperate with him and he punished corrupt officials with great severity, a policy that only engendered revolts and plots against the emperor; a few nobles even fled to foreign principalities where they stirred up trouble

against Byzantium. In addition, it should be remembered, the aristocrats whom the emperor opposed were at the time the very foundation of Byzantine military power.

As a result of these internal difficulties the alliances that Manuel I had built in the Balkans began to come apart. Bela III, the king of Hungary, posed as the avenger of Maria of Antioch, and, allied with the Serbians, attacked Byzantine territory in 1183. The Hungarians withdrew the next year but in the aftermath Stefan Nemanja was able to secure independence for Serbia, and many of the Byzantine cities of the Balkans lay in ruins. The Normans saw this situation as an opportunity to invade once more, and William II, then the Norman king, moved his troops from Dyrrachion on the Adriatic eastward, taking Thessaloniki after an especially difficult siege. The population of Constantinople, until then strong supporters of the emperor, abandoned him, and Andronikos was overthrown and torn apart by the mob on September 12, 1185.

With the fall of Andronikos Komnenos the dynasty of the Komnenoi came to an end and with it all attempts to place limits on the independence of the landowning aristocracy. Over the next 20 years the central authority of the state collapsed and local dynasts and petty tyrants became all but independent, dramatically foreshadowing the results of the Fourth Crusade.

The new emperor was Isaac II Angelos (1185–95), a member of an aristocratic family that owed its prominence to the fact that his grandfather had married the youngest daughter of Alexios I. Isaac made little effort to check the power of the provincial aristocracy and he was accused of selling offices and committing other fiscal abuses, raising money, perhaps, for his ambitious building schemes in the capital. He did, however, take the field when necessary, and his general Alexios Vranas was able to halt the expansion of the Normans in the Balkans. Isaac married the daughter of Bela III of Hungary and thus secured some peace from that direction, but a serious revolt broke out in Bulgaria, led by the brothers Peter and Asen, who established themselves in the new capital of Trnovo. The revolt gained support among a population of Bulgarians and Vlachs angered at excessive taxation, and Stefan Nemanja in Serbia used the opportunity to throw off Byzantine rule there.

Although Isaac survived a revolt led by Vranas and he pursued the war against Bulgaria diligently, he could make little headway in the Balkans. The arrival of Frederick Barbarossa and the German contingent of the Third Crusade in 1189 only worsened the situation, and the rulers of Serbia and Bulgaria were quick to ally themselves with the westerners against Byzantium. Isaac sought to gain the



support of Saladin, who had taken Jerusalem in 1187, and as a result Barbarossa threatened to attack Constantinople itself. In 1190 Isaac was forced to agree to help the Germans on their way to the Holy Land. Barbarossa's death in Asia Minor allowed Isaac to take the initiative in the Balkans, where he met with some success against the Serbs. The treaty that followed (in 1190) acknowledged Serbian independence but sought to keep Serbia in the Byzantine sphere of influence.

In 1191 Richard I Lionheart of England took the island of Cyprus, which had been virtually independent under the adventurer Isaac Komnenos (brother of Manuel I), who had seized the island in 1184; in 1192 Richard sold the island to the Knights Templar and then gave it to Guy de Lusignan, the former king of Jerusalem. From that time onward Cyprus was to be in Latin hands.

Isaac II had further difficulties with the Bulgarians and, in 1195, just as he was preparing a new expedition against them, his elder brother Alexios revolted and had Isaac blinded, seizing the throne himself as Alexios III (1195–1203).

Alexios III had none of the dedication to duty that characterized his brother, and the central government was in an advanced state of dissolution. His choice of provincial administrators was questionable at best, and many of them (e.g., Leon Sgouros in Greece) became virtually independent rulers. In the Balkans the situation deteriorated considerably. In 1196 Stefan Nemanja retired, passing on the throne to his son, Stefan "the First-Crowned" (*zupan* 1195–1217, king of Serbia 1217–27), who was the son-in-law of Alexios III. Byzantium was completely unable to take advantage of this opportunity, and instead the region fell under the influence of Hungary, which encouraged the spread of Catholic power in the Balkans. Bulgaria remained a problem, despite the assassinations of both Asen and Peter, and their youngest brother Kalojan (1197–1207) proved to be one of the most talented rulers of the period. Disturbingly for Byzantium, Kalojan sought to be crowned, not by a representative of the patriarch in Constantinople, but by an emissary of the pope, and the power of western Christianity continued to grow, even in Bulgaria.

Byzantium's most serious challenge, however, came from the German emperor, Henry VI, who had taken the imperial throne from his father Frederic I in 1190 when the latter departed for the Third Crusade. He also claimed the (Norman) kingdom of Sicily through his wife, who was the last living heir of William II, and so he was immediately opposed to Byzantium. Henry pressed territorial and political claims against Constantinople, demanding the territories the Normans had held in 1185 and using a remote family connection to pose as

the avenger of the deposed emperor Isaac II. Alexios III sought accommodation with Henry, and even Pope Innocent III was frightened by the German emperor's claims to world domination. As events turned out, however, Henry died suddenly in 1197 before he could carry out his plans for eastward expansion. After his death the German empire weakened, and the most powerful political figure in the West was the pope, Innocent III.

## Changes in Byzantine Society and Culture

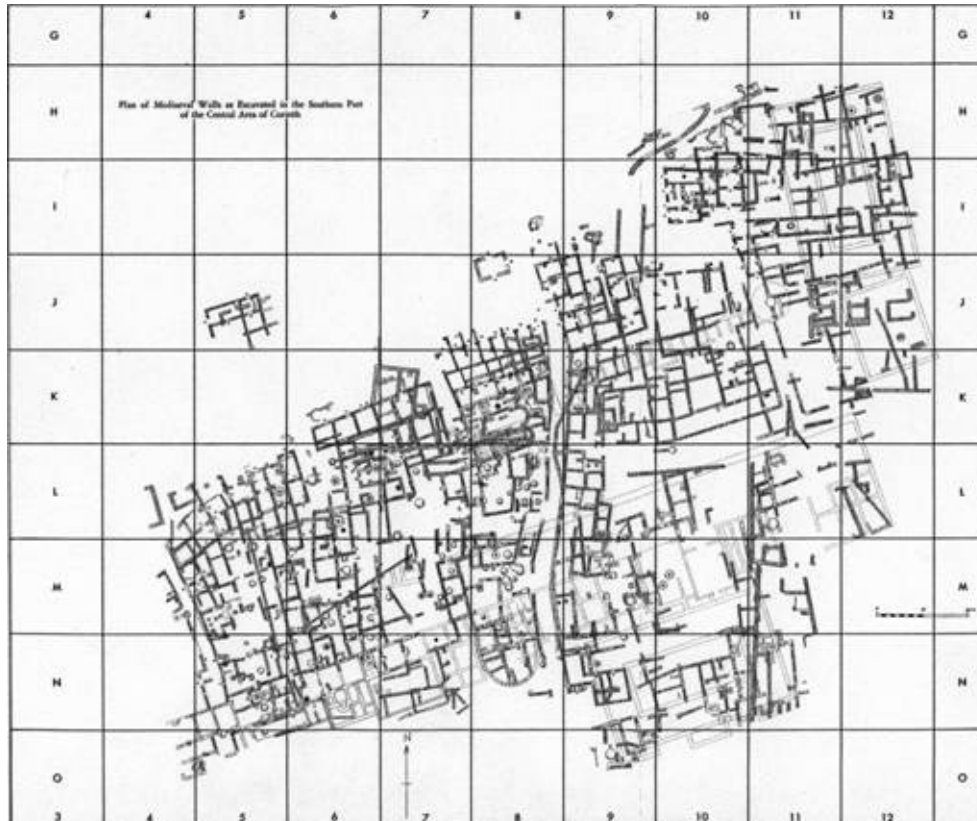
The twelfth century witnessed profound cultural, social, and economic changes that were to have significant effects on the very fabric of Byzantine life for the next 300 years and beyond. Much has been written about these phenomena and at one time scholars viewed the period as mere slow decline between the Battle of Mantzikert in 1071 and the fall of Constantinople to the Fourth Crusade in 1204. Archaeological investigations and a reappraisal of Byzantine literature and thought have, however, forced a reappraisal. Much of this is a result of scholarship on the western Middle Ages, which has for some time regarded the twelfth century there as a period of revival and prosperity, indeed often referred to as a renaissance in its own right. In the Byzantine Empire there is plentiful evidence that the twelfth century witnessed significant economic growth and increased specialization and complexity in both cultural and economic spheres. In part this change was probably due to climatic factors, in that the weather in Europe seems to have improved generally from ca. ad 1000 onward, but military and political factors also played important roles.

These changes, of course, were built on the structures that had existed in the past, and one can certainly see much continuity as well as change. Perhaps the most important change has already been briefly discussed in the previous chapter: the growth of the military aristocracy. This should not be seen in only political or military terms, as it also had many cultural manifestations, not the least of which was the militarization of aristocratic ideals, growth in the popularity of military saints, greater significance given to birth and lineage, and even a militarization of the image of the ideal ruler. Indeed, as seen above, there was a strong tendency in the age for the identification of aristocracy with the imperial family and it is not surprising that the ideals of the military aristocracy and those of the emperors were normally one and the same.

**Figure 12.3** Plan of medieval Korinth. This plan provides a good idea of what a

Byzantine city would have looked like, notably the maze-like arrangement of the streets and the absence of any apparent planning. The houses are small and simple and the only structures that stand out are the churches and monasteries.

Robert Scranton, *Corinth 16: Medieval Architecture in the Central Area of Corinth* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), plan VI. Reproduced with permission from the Trustees of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.

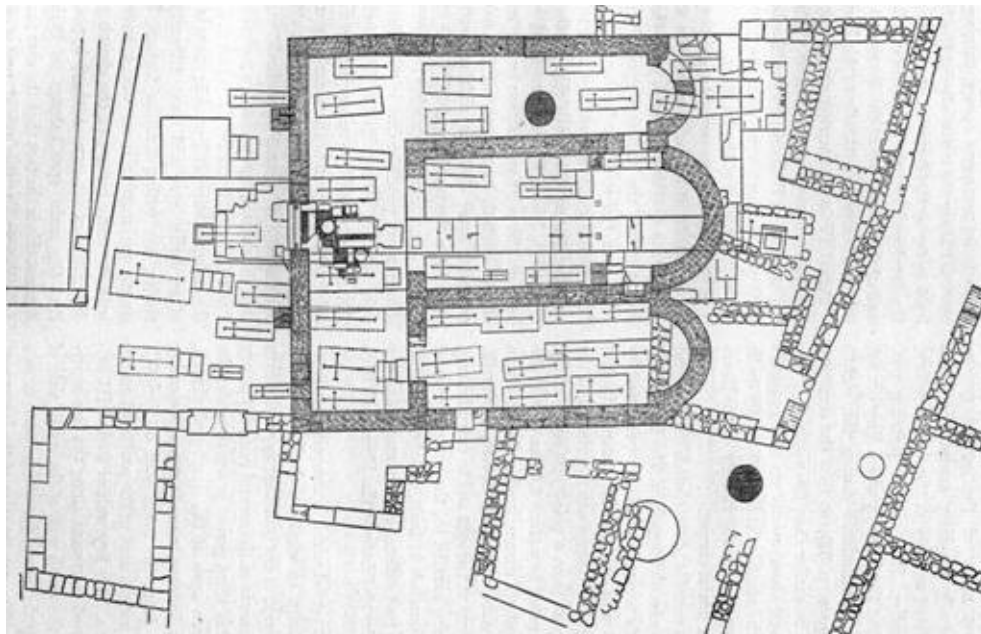


Economically, the twelfth century seems to have witnessed a decline in the resources available to the state while, at the same time, the wealth of the empire as a whole enjoyed a real resurgence. Whether this was due to the impetus given to the economy by the Venetian traders, whether the wealth of the countryside was a direct result of the inability of the central government to collect taxes, and whether these developments were good things for Byzantium as a whole are difficult to know at present, although they will certainly repay further consideration.

One may reasonably ask, in this context, about the fate of the peasants, who certainly made up the vast majority of the inhabitants of the empire. We have already discussed the growth of large landholdings and the unevenly defined *pronoia* system which gave the aristocrats virtually absolute power over the lands they controlled. The peasants, transformed into *paroikoi*, generally

speaking, lost control of the land their forefathers had held and most of them worked as tenant farmers for the *dynatoi*. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to see these people simply as downtrodden semi-slaves. It is clear that the *paroikoi* could legally own land and that many of them did so. Likewise, the relatively peaceful conditions in many parts of the empire in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (compared to previous periods) presumably brought a degree of prosperity and both the landowners and the *paroikoi* had an interest in improving the land by cutting the brush, constructing terrace walls, and expanding cultivation. There seems reason to believe that, although the legal situation of the peasants may have been worse in this period than it had been in the ninth and tenth centuries, their general economic situation was, presumably, significantly better. Given the generally mixed agricultural economy of this period, the concentration of wealth in the hands of the aristocracy and the concomitant increase in trade also had a positive impact on the broader agricultural economy, which was not disconnected with the broader economic currents of the time.

**Figure 12.4** Plan of the Bema Church in Corinth. This church was built on the ruins of the so-called Bema (speaker's platform) in the forum area of Corinth where, according to tradition, St. Paul was tried by the Roman governor. This elevated space was used as a platform on which the church was built. Notice the many graves that were set into the floor of the church and its immediate vicinity. Robert Scranton, *Corinth 16: Medieval Architecture in the Central Area of Corinth* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), fig. 3, p. 44. Reproduced with permission from the Trustees of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.



What seems certain, then, is that in the twelfth century Byzantium enjoyed an overall economic improvement and, in addition, what can only be called an urban revival. We have already talked about the importance of cities in understanding the transition from late antiquity to the Middle Ages in Byzantium, and it is clear that there was some degree of urban revival in the ninth and tenth centuries in many parts of the empire. It is also apparent, from both literary and archaeological evidence, that the real urban revival in Byzantium took place in the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries, with significant variations in this phenomenon from region to region of the empire. In the Balkans this development was much more widespread in the southern part, while in the north, along the Danube which was more exposed to barbarian attack, the boom may have been cut short. In Macedonia and other areas cities based at least in part on long-distance trade came into being. The anonymous author of the *Timarion* describes in some detail the annual *panigyris* (fair) at Thessaloniki in the middle of the twelfth century, noting that merchants from all round the Mediterranean, from the West as well as Islamic lands, and even from southern Russia, came to the fair to trade and sell goods. The situation among the cities of Asia Minor is more difficult to characterize, in part because so much of the country had fallen into the hands of the Seljuk Turks after Mantzikert. Nonetheless, even there we have evidence of an urban revival in many centers.

These “new” Byzantine cities were normally built on the sites of the famous cities of antiquity, and they normally continued to be called by the same names: there can be little question that life (whether fully urban or not) had continued in these places since antiquity. But these cities were certainly very different in appearance from their classical predecessors. Commonly the civic center had moved from its original location, and the street-plan had abandoned the gridiron pattern of the Hippodamian plan, which was replaced by what might be described as a warren of winding streets and lanes going off in different directions. New monumental buildings came into existence in the form of churches, sometimes on the foundations of early Christian basilicas, but more often in new places, but these were normally small and would not have stood out strongly against the neighborhoods in which they were set.

It is noteworthy that this Byzantine economic and urban expansion (along, of course, with the question of feudalism) can be paralleled with contemporary developments in the West. Nonetheless, although the similarities are intriguing and greater than have previously been acknowledged, there are important differences. On the one hand, in the West there was an inherent opposition



between the feudal aristocracy and the growing power of the emperor and the national monarchs, while in Byzantium no such opposition existed. The Byzantine aristocracy, for all its independent military inclinations, maintained

### **Box 12.3 Western-Style Tournaments in Byzantium**

In the twelfth century, after the arrival of the Crusaders in Byzantine territory, westernstyle tournaments became popular among the Byzantine aristocracy. This corresponded with the growing dominance of military ideals among Byzantine aristocrats at the time. Thus, whereas in earlier centuries the Byzantine aristocracy had been concerned primarily with landowning and/or political matters, by the twelfth century military concerns had become paramount and this included pastimes such as tourneys and jousts, familiar from the western Middle Ages. The contests, in which the friendly combatants dressed sumptuously in ceremonial military gear, were highly formalized but still often resulted in bloodshed, serious wounds, and not uncommonly deaths.

These military entertainments were particularly popular at the court of the emperor Manuel I (1143–80), who was otherwise significantly influenced by western ideas. The historian Niketas Choniates described one such tournament arranged for the emperor's arrival in the city of Antioch in 1159. Manuel himself took part in the tournament, dressed in a sumptuous cloak that left his right arm free for action and riding a noble horse that was decorated with golden accoutrements. The emperor was joined by a picked band of Byzantine aristocrats, whom he ordered to dress as beautifully as possible. Opposed to the Byzantines in this ceremonial fight were the knights of the western prince of Antioch, Reynald of Châtillon. The prince was mounted on a stallion "whiter than snow," and wearing a long shirt and a golden crown, and he was followed by his best combatants, "all as mighty as Ares and tremendously tall" (Niketas Choniates, *Historia*, ed. J. L. van Dieten, pp. 108–9).

Choniates described the tumult of the battle that followed, with knights being unseated, some pale with fear and others rejoicing in their success. He obviously found the spectacle somewhat comic, as the knights fell over each other, and he compared the incongruous sight to how one must imagine the lovemaking of Ares (the fierce god of war) and Aphrodite (the beautiful goddess of love).

#### ***FURTHER READING***

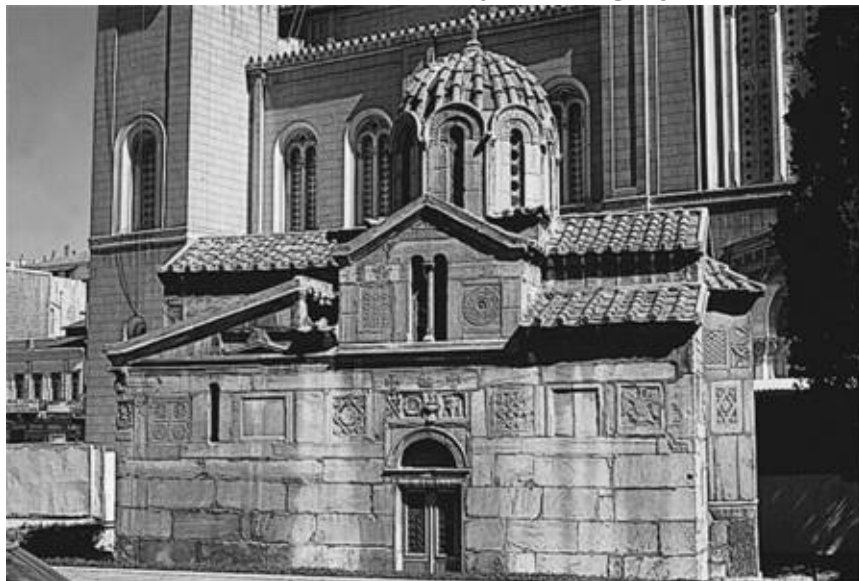
Niketas Choniates, *Historia*, ed. J. L. van Dieten. New York and Berlin, 1975, pp. 108–9.  
A. P. Kazhdan and A. W. Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*. Berkeley, CA, 1985, p. 109.

an identification with and interest in the cities and, while the western national monarchs were able to use the wealth of the cities as a weapon against the aristocracy, no such possibility existed for the emperors of Constantinople.

The wealth of the cities and, even more important, the wealth of the Byzantine aristocracy found expression in works of art and architecture that have left a rich record in the area controlled by the Byzantine state. In part, it can be argued, this

was the result of a growing sense of individualism or, perhaps more accurately, “family individualism,” which came to characterize the period. This is something we can see in the work of scholars such as Psellos in the eleventh century, but it clearly spread outside the capital in the twelfth century and afterward.

**Figure 12.5** “Little Metropolitan,” Athens, ca. 1200. This small cross-in-square church in Athens is unusual in that it was built completely of marble blocks, reused from earlier structures. These blocks include a small sculpture of the ancient goddess Athena, carved allusions to the cult of Eleusis (the Eleusinian Mysteries), and the only surviving depiction of the Panathenaic procession in Athens. Many ancient funeral reliefs were also employed, frequently modified to include crosses. Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



One of the clearest indications of this growth of individuality is in the form of church-building in this period. Indeed, the twelfth century seems to have witnessed an explosion in the construction of churches, a phenomenon that confounded earlier historians who were working on the assumption that the period was one of economic collapse. Not only were large numbers of churches constructed in the twelfth century; regional schools of architecture began to develop, some of them in relatively small areas, showing that significant wealth was available in what must previously have been backwaters of the Byzantine Empire. Thus, we can speak of distinct architectural traditions in places such as Macedonia, Cyprus, central Greece, Attica, and the Argolid. Architectural styles, floor-plans, and exterior surface decoration (which came to play a significant role) all varied from place to place and, of course, there was room for significant

differences within the individual traditions.

Careful examination also shows significant traces of individualism and independent interpretation of traditional themes in literature and art in this period. Again, this was probably a development from beginnings in the eleventh century, such as the revival of monumental architecture in that century – perhaps connected with the growth of an audience for art. The ideas of the twelfth century, however, showed a new interest not only in ideal forms but also in the natural world. There is evidence, for example, that some were concerned that ikons of saints should actually bear a resemblance to the physical appearance of the original. The same can be seen in literature, which had traditionally been dominated by traditions from antiquity. Influenced in particular by the *Chronographia* of Psellos, historians became interested in the development of personality and the way individuals interacted with the circumstances in which they found themselves. Particularly characteristic in this regard is the *Alexiad* of Anna Komnena, which, though highly classicizing in form, still possesses a keen interest in physical description and detail. Even more, the *Historia* of Niketas Choniates demonstrates the author's self-conscious exploration of the world around him and his interest and curiosity about the human condition and humans as the principal agents in history. Niketas (d. 1217) and his elder brother Michael Choniates (who was archbishop of Athens 1175–1204) demonstrate much that is best in the literature and intellectual world of the late eleventh to early thirteenth centuries. The same can be said for the poetry of the age, such as the romance, *Drosilla and Charikles*, of Niketas Eugeneianos, the entire oeuvre of Theodore Prodromos, and the romance-epic *Digenes Akrikas* (mentioned in the previous chapter), which presumably reached its final form at this time.

The same characteristics can be seen in the art of the period. The mosaics and frescoes of the age frequently abandon the abstractness of earlier art and the figures are depicted more in a three-dimensional view and with a real sense of movement. This can clearly be seen in such depictions as the mosaics at Daphni near Athens, Osios Loukas in central Greece, and Nea Moni in Chios, as well as the Communion of the Apostles from the church at Perachorio in Cyprus (third quarter of the twelfth century). Often this change has simply been described as classicism and a return to classical realism, based perhaps on the recovery of Hellenistic-period copy-books. Obviously, there is something to such an observation, but the broader question is why patrons and/or artists would prefer such styles, rather than the more traditional two-dimensional depictions of the past. It is characteristic that the great works of art of this period, admired by

many who do not like much in the Byzantine tradition, have been ascribed to the genius of the classical tradition rather than to the Byzantines themselves. One may, however, look at the situation the other way round and praise the Byzantines, not only for the maintenance of the classical tradition, but more so for their increasingly individualized and multifaceted use of that tradition, as well as the many others that they manipulated and used as their own.

This individualism occasionally found political expression in what we might call a kind of regional political independence. This can be seen, at least by the end of the twelfth century, both in Asia Minor (Philadelphia) and in the southern Balkans, where the dynasts of the Sgouros and Chamaretos families dominated the areas of Nauplion/Argos and Monemvasia, respectively. In the words of the historian Niketas Choniates, “The western provinces were divided into so many tyrannies; what good [thing] was not absent, and what evil was not present? Confiscation of monies, deportations ... and massacres” (*O City of Byzantium*, trans. H. J. Magoulias, p. 350).

## **Box 12.4 East and West in the Prelude to the Fourth Crusade (Tenth to Twelfth Centuries)**

There can be no doubt that the events leading up to the Fourth Crusade were fundamental in determining not only the events of 1204, but also many of the major trends in the history of western civilization since that point. Needless to say, most of these events took place in western Europe and, to a lesser extent, eastern Europe. The focus of this book on the course of Byzantine history does not allow a detailed discussion of these phenomena, although many of them are mentioned in passing as they occurred. This digression is designed as a follow-up to Boxes 9.3 and 9.4 and it presents a few of the major developments in a way that should help the reader place them in the context of Byzantine history. This section is by no means designed as an abbreviated history of western Europe in this period, but rather as an opportunity to highlight some of the major phenomena, such as the following.

### ***The Rise of the West in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries: Security and Population***

One of the truly significant changes was the transformation of western Europe from a relatively poor and politically underdeveloped place to a center of population expansion, economic change, and relative political stability. This is not the place to discuss the causes of this phenomenon, but simply to point out some of its characteristics, many of which must have been causally interconnected. Generally speaking, the year AD 1000 may be taken as a convenient mark for the beginning of this change. Prior to this time Europe was wracked by “barbarian” invasions from at least the last years of the Roman Empire. These had included attacks by Vikings/Norsemen in the north, settlement of most of the Balkans by Slavic peoples, and movements of various Turkic and other nomadic peoples into east central Europe, the most recent of these being the Magyars in the ninth and tenth centuries. One may add to these the expansion of the Arabs into southern Europe in

the seventh and eighth centuries. By AD 1000 these barbarian invasions had come to an end and life was generally more peaceful and settled. Not surprisingly, this allowed for population growth and greater agricultural productivity, phenomena that may have been aided by climatic improvement and the development of new agricultural technology and methods. New lands were sought out and brought under cultivation, some of it marginal land that had not previously been used, but others made available through conquest. Population increase was initially a very positive development, from a variety of points of view, but by the end of the twelfth century there was an increasing scarcity of land available to support everyone. This shortage led to a demand for technological innovation and military expansion, undoubtedly a factor in the growth of the crusading movement.

### ***Political Developments in the West***

In this same period political life became increasingly organized and stable, and ultimately national monarchies arose. One can trace this back to the coronation of Charlemagne in AD 800 and to the development of feudalism, a system that curbed some of the violence of the early Middle Ages and brought organization and order to political and military systems in western Europe. The ephemeral “empire” of Charlemagne was revived in the tenth century by the German emperors from Otto I (962) onward. This Western Empire in its many manifestations continued to represent a pan-European, Christian superstate, even into modern times. Meanwhile, what we may call the forerunners of the modern national European states began to emerge, perhaps first in France, and then in England (after 1066), and elsewhere. Notable in this respect was the development of Norman states in Sicily and southern Italy, and the tendency of the Western (German) Empire to expand south into northern Italy and east into the Slavic-dominated areas of central and eastern Europe, where they came, in both cases, into direct conflict with Byzantine interests. These states were all monarchies and the kings had to struggle against the entrenched power of the feudal aristocracies, who sought to defend their local independence. In the twelfth century the power of the national monarchies reached a high point, although important challenges were to come in subsequent years. The national monarchies relied particularly heavily on the emerging economic power of the cities and the merchants who resided there (see below).

### ***The Papacy***

As mentioned previously, the bishop of Rome had, from the early days of Christianity, held an important position in the church, both because of the Biblical passage in which Christ gives special power to the Apostle Peter (thought to be the first bishop of Rome) and because the pope was the only important bishop in the West who survived the fall of the Roman Empire and the period of the barbarian invasions. For the most part, the popes were concerned to maintain or increase their power in the West, spread Christianity to the non-Romanized peoples who made up much of Europe, and counter corruption and lawlessness both in the church and in society as a whole. In part, the difficulties of the western church stemmed from the power held by the secular rulers, especially the feudal aristocrats, who frequently controlled monasteries and individual churches, appointing their own relatives as abbots and bishops, and taking for themselves the significant revenues that the church claimed. Various Christian leaders called for reform, and the most effective movement was led by Odo (ca. 878–942), abbot of the important monastery of Cluny. Although the history of this phenomenon is complex and has many elements, one was the revival of an older concept that, in order to free the church of secular domination and to reform its morals, all church officials must be chosen by and be strictly obedient to the pope. Thus, reforming popes – most of them undoubtedly motivated by noble concerns – sought to demand absolute obedience from all bishops and even the political authorities. Not surprisingly, the papacy wished to impose this demand in areas beyond western Europe, most notably in the lands controlled by the patriarch

of Constantinople (and by extension the areas supposedly belonging to the patriarchs of the other eastern churches, which were at the time all under the domination of Islam). Such ideas were at the heart of conflicts between Byzantium and the papacy over the centuries, and it is important to understand that this was a matter of fundamental disagreement about who should control Christian society throughout the world. These conflicts led, ultimately, to the Schism of 1054 and the permanent split between the two major branches of Christianity, an event that had long-lasting ramifications for the division of Europe that have lasted to the present day.

In the West, meanwhile, the focus of the papacy on the need for reform led to a long-drawn-out struggle with political leaders, more especially with the German emperors, the most powerful secular rulers of the day. The issue was, in many ways similar to the disagreement between the papacy and the patriarch of Constantinople in that it was a struggle to determine who had rightful control over society as a whole. Although the issue had many other ramifications, in the eleventh century it focused on the issue of lay investiture, the procedure whereby bishops of the church were essentially chosen and invested by the secular rulers. The dominant reforming party within the western church determined that lay investiture was the cause of ecclesiastical immorality and the weakness of the church, and they determined to put an end to it. The greatest of these reformers was Pope Gregory VII (1073–85), who engaged in an epic struggle with King Henry IV of Germany (1056–1106). Henry, for his part, relied on ecclesiastical appointments (mainly bishops) as royal appointments, whom he used to control the powerful German nobles. As the controversy escalated the pope threatened to excommunicate the king and the king declared his ecclesiastical appointees free from their obedience to the pope. Naturally, the German king had political and military power, but the moral position of the papacy and his claim that political power was subject to the will of God ultimately won the day and in 1077 the German king made the long trek across the Alps and stood before the papal residence to seek forgiveness. The papacy that had recently separated from the Byzantine church now stood triumphant and at the height of its prestige and power.

### ***Trade, the Economy, and Cities***

As population and wealth increased, long-distance trade began to develop in western Europe. This was also affected by the discovery and utilization of significant mineral resources, including iron, tin, silver, and even coal. Mining activity prior to the year 1000 was limited in extent and in productivity, but the expansion of settlement into marginal lands resulted in the discovery of new sources of metal and the development of new technologies, such as the greater use of water power and blast furnaces, which increased production. Not surprisingly, the rulers (especially the national monarchs) sought to control these resources. The growth of wealth promoted the development of trade and ultimately the appearance of a distinct group of merchants. The merchants frequently settled on the outskirts of towns or near the fortified settlements of feudal lords, and their increasing prosperity gave them opportunities to develop their own institutions, such as self-governing guilds, and ultimately control of the towns themselves. The monarchs, seeking allies in their struggle with the feudal lords, often secured loans or direct payments (i.e., taxes) from the merchants in order to hire mercenaries to fight the aristocracy. The merchants, for their part, were often willing to make such payments, since the kings were more likely to provide security over larger areas than were the feudal lords. The cities of northern Italy, in particular Venice, Genoa, and Pisa, began to develop large fleets that traded across the Mediterranean, their merchants amassing enormous fortunes and the cities building powerful navies to protect their mercantile interests. Although merchant-based towns developed throughout Europe in the twelfth century, the cities of Italy were generally far more economically advanced and politically and militarily involved in issues beyond western Europe.

## ***Caucasus, the Balkans, and the North***

In the period of the ninth to twelfth century changes in these areas were dramatic and multifaceted. They involved the stabilization of the steppe corridor, with the replacement of the Khazars as the main ally of the Byzantines by the Russians and the emergence of independent states among the Slavic and other peoples of the Balkans. Equally important was the conversion of many of these peoples and states to Byzantine Christianity and the influence of Byzantine culture and trade in this area.

### **Russia**

In the ninth century the Khazars were still the main Byzantine ally in the area north of the Black Sea and the Caucasus and they assisted the Byzantines against the caliphate and in maintaining stability in their own region. In the course of the ninth century the Khazar empire began to break down and by the early tenth century the Patzinaks (Pechenegs) and the Rhos had taken their place as the most important powers in the area. The Rhos (or Rus), as previously mentioned, were apparently a Viking military and commercial aristocracy that had established dominance over the various peoples, many Slavic, who inhabited the river systems that ran between the Black Sea in the south and the Baltic Sea in the north. The Rhos attacked Constantinople in 860, 941, and 944 and established a political center at Kiev. Byzantium came to see the Rhos as a powerful ally and diplomatic relations ultimately led to the conversion of Prince Vladimir (980–1015) in 988 and with him virtually all of Russian (as we may now call it) society. The reigns of Vladimir and Yaroslav (1019–54) constituted the golden age of Russian power, but the sack of Kiev by north Russian princes in 1169, the migration of various Turkic peoples, and finally, the appearance of the Mongols (also called Tatars in Russia) in the thirteenth century caused the displacement of Russian power to the north, to the areas of Novgorod and Vladimir-Suzdal.

### **Bulgaria**

From the time of Khan Krum (802–14) Bulgaria threatened Byzantium militarily while, at the same time, falling increasingly under Byzantine ecclesiastical and cultural influence. Until the reign of Boris-Michael, the Bulgarian capital Pliska was a pagan city, but in 864 Bulgaria accepted Christianity and the Slavic element in Bulgaria increased in influence. The tsar Symeon (893–927) brought this first Bulgarian empire to a height of military power and established a new capital at Preslav; militarily he caught Byzantium at a difficult moment and nearly became emperor in Constantinople itself. The Byzantines sought to deal with Symeon by calling on the Magyars, a Turkic people settled in the area of the Caucasus, to attack the Bulgarians from the rear; Symeon met the challenge and countered the Byzantine maneuver by allying with the Patzinaks (Pechenegs), who then cooperated in an attack on the Magyars (896), forcing them to migrate westward to Pannonia, where they settled permanently. After the death of Symeon Bulgaria remained independent but under general Byzantine influence. By the middle of the eleventh century Bulgaria began to assert greater independence, but the Byzantines were able to counter their ambitions by calling on the Russians, who attacked them from the north, leading briefly to a Russian occupation of the country until the defeat of Svjatoslav by John Tzimiskes and his capture of Preslav in 971. In the difficulties of the early part of the reign of Basil II, Bulgaria again gained independence under the tsar Samuel, from 987 onward, and Ochrid, in Macedonia, became capital of a new Bulgarian state. After a long war, Basil was completely victorious and from 1018 until 1185 Bulgaria was a province of the Byzantine Empire.

### **Serbia**

In the mid ninth century a loosely organized state began to emerge in the northern reaches of the Bulgarian state. Following the lead of Bulgaria, these people seem to have accepted Byzantine

Christianity by the end of the ninth century, but the political leadership collapsed and this early Serbian state was incorporated within the Byzantine Empire in 1018. By about 1040 the Serbs had overthrown Byzantine control, in part as a result of growing western influence in the region, and in the twelfth century a new political structure began to emerge in central Serbia that would develop into the powerful state of subsequent centuries. A critical moment in this development was the rule of Stefan Nemanja (1166–99), grand prince of Rascia, who was able to unite various Serbian territories and sought to gain independence from Byzantine control. He ultimately had to recognize Manuel I Komnenos as his overlord, but after Manuel's death in 1180, Nemanja was essentially independent and he was able to expand his control significantly, while at the same time encouraging the power of the Orthodox church against that of the Catholics. In 1191 the emperor Isaac II Angelos defeated Nemanja, who was again forced to recognize Byzantine nominal control of Serbia.

## **Hungary**

As mentioned above, the Magyars settled in the Carpathian Basin in central Europe in 896 as a result of the wars between Bulgaria and Byzantium and the alliance of Bulgaria with the Patzinaks. For a time the Magyars remained a semi-nomadic group, and their incursions in the West were halted by the western emperor Otto I at the Battle of Lechfield in 955 and similar attacks on Byzantium interests came to an end after their defeat by John Tzimiskes in 970. The Magyar rulers are generally accepted as the founders of the medieval state of Hungary, and in the tenth century, efforts were made by the Christian powers to bring this area under their religious authority. From the middle of the tenth century the Byzantine church was ascendant in Hungary, but the new state wished to be politically independent of Bulgaria, which was more closely aligned with Byzantium and the Byzantine church. Ultimately, around AD 1000 Prince Stephen cast his lot with the papacy and used that alliance in an attempt to establish his authority over the Magyar chieftains and establish a unified kingdom. Over the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries the power of the Hungarian king grew and the state also expanded, conquering Croatia at one point and developing a strong medieval economy on the far northern border of the region in which the Byzantine state sought to operate.

## ***Changes in the Muslim world***

The changes that had begun to occur in the ninth century within the Abassid caliphate accelerated in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. As we have seen, the Hamdanid dynasty ruled some of southeastern Asia Minor, Syria, and Iraq, beginning at the end of the ninth century. From the end of the tenth century the Gahaznavid empire came to dominate most of the eastern part of the caliphate, while the Seljuks and the Danismends took over control of most of the western domains. The Seljuks were a Turkic group that settled north of the Caucasus and then moved into Iran in the tenth century and by the eleventh had generally adopted Persian language and culture. They filled the void left by the weakness of the caliphate and the Hamdanids and built a loosely knit empire that stretched over much of the Near East. After the Battle of Mantzikert in 1071, the Seljuks established the sultanate of Rum in Konya (Ikonion) and controlled most of central Asia Minor, with the Danismends in the east, until they were both defeated in 1243 by the Mongols and completely displaced in the fourteenth century by the Ottomans. The Seljuks were able to absorb a number of smaller Turkic groups and they allowed considerable self-rule, while at the same time encouraging trade and economic development. It was during the Seljuk domination of Asia Minor that the Byzantines permanently lost control of the heartland of the empire.

In Syria and northern Iraq the situation was similar, and political power was in the hands of local rulers often associated with the so-called Seljk Artuqid dynasty. This dynasty was supposedly in power at the time of the First Crusade, but it was not able to offer significant resistance to the



westerners, in part because of its conflict with the Fatimid rulers of Egypt. The Fatimids represent something of a contradiction to this period of weakening central authority in this period of the Middle East. This Shi'i dynasty arose in Tunisia and Algeria and it came into control of Egypt in the second half of the tenth century, establishing, among other things, Cairo as its capital. At its height, the Fatimid dynasty controlled North Africa, Palestine, Syria, the Hijaz, and Yemen, and it promoted far-reaching trade, science and a tolerance contradicted by one of its most infamous members, the caliph Al-Hakim who, among other peculiar actions, ordered severe discrimination against Christians and others who did not agree with him, culminating in the destruction of the Holy Sepulchre in 1009, an act which some have seen as one of the events leading to the First Crusade.

Beginning about the middle of the eleventh century Fatimid power began to diminish and by the 1070s most of the Levant had fallen to the Seljuks. Egypt, however, remained in Fatimid hands somewhat longer. In the 1120s Zengi of Aleppo and Mosul, a Seljuk official, offered the first serious Muslim opposition to the Crusader states (see below), capturing Edessa in 1144. His son Nur ad-Din continued his father's success in dealing with the western rulers of the Levant, especially the successive kings of Jerusalem, with whom he competed for control of Fatimid Egypt. Finally, he dispatched his Kurdish general Shirkuh, who captured Cairo in 1169. Shirkuh's nephew and successor as governor of Egypt was Saladin, and he declared his independence from Nur ad-Din and eventually established the so-called Ayyubid dynasty in Egypt. Saladin, one of the best known of Muslim rulers of the Middle Ages, returned to Syria, consolidated his power, and began a series of attacks on the Crusaders of Jerusalem. Despite initial setbacks, Saladin persevered, finally taking the city in 1187, offering quarter to the defenders and all the residents of the city.

## **The Fourth Crusade**

The question of the causes and the motivation of the Fourth Crusade has long been debated and no real scholarly consensus has emerged as to exactly how the movement designed to conquer the Holy Lands resulted in the capture of the Christian city of Constantinople and the dismemberment of the Byzantine Empire. Nonetheless, the main issues are clear. First, the growing weakness of Byzantium was evident to all, and the events of the past century and a half had created mutual suspicion, if not downright hatred, between westerners and Byzantines. Second, the Byzantines had never understood the crusading ideal and regarded western interests in the East with great suspicion. Third, the crusaders did not understand the Byzantines' lack of enthusiasm for the Crusades and their frequent hesitation to provide assistance or, worse yet, Byzantine willingness to work with the Muslims against the crusaders. Furthermore, there had long been tensions between the papacy and the Byzantine church and state, from at least the mid ninth century, and the movements for reform that led to the development of the papal monarchy were bound to run foul of, not only the interests of the German emperors, but also the much older institution of the

Byzantine Empire. In a simple sense, the papacy and the Byzantine Empire were both based on claims of universal (ecumenical, one might say) sovereignty: each claimed to be God's sole representative on earth. The battleground for missionary activity in the Balkans continued to be real, but popes such as Innocent III looked to secure the acceptance of papal sovereignty from the church of Byzantium, which was considered to be schismatic. Finally, the Italian merchant republics, most notably the Venetians, had long coveted the wealth of Byzantium. To be sure, since the end of the eleventh century the Venetians had a favored trading position within the Byzantine Empire, but this was something that had to be reaffirmed at the accession of every new emperor, and some had been reluctant to provide it. Hostility toward the Venetians (indeed to all westerners) was evident in Byzantium, and the riots and massacres of 1171 and 1182 created an atmosphere of increased tension.

In the events that led to the diversion of the Fourth Crusade, the personalities of Pope Innocent III and the Venetian doge, Enrico Dandolo, were paramount, but it is unreasonable to say that the whole thing was a plot, previously thought out. Certainly, all the elements were in place for an attack on Byzantium, and many westerners, especially the Normans and some of the Venetians, had openly talked about the conquest of Constantinople. Mutual hostility, greed, and the weakness of Byzantium were the main factors behind the events, but specific circumstances brought about the actual conquest of Constantinople.

Innocent III proclaimed the Fourth Crusade in 1202, and the Crusaders, under the leadership of Boniface of Montferrat, assembled in Venice, from which they were to sail to Egypt. The Crusaders, however, did not have the funds to pay the Venetians for transport, so an agreement was made, whereby the Crusaders were to stop at Zara, on the Dalmatian coast, which had rebelled from Venice and gone over to the Hungarians; the Crusaders were to assist the Venetians in securing control of the city once again. This was the first diversion of the Crusade, and, although the inhabitants of Zara hung crosses on the walls, the city was taken (in 1202). In the meantime, Alexios Angelos, the son of the deposed Isaac II, traveled to the West, seeking aid first from Innocent III and then from Philip of Swabia, the successor of Henry VI of Germany and brother-in-law of the Byzantine prince. Young Alexios made lavish offers to the Crusaders (including a promise to acknowledge the supremacy of the papacy) if they would help him to regain his rightful throne in Constantinople. The Crusaders accepted this proposal, and Alexios joined the Crusade in 1203.

Upon the arrival of the Crusaders outside Constantinople, Alexios III fled the

city, and Isaac II and his son Alexios IV were proclaimed as emperors. Alexios attempted to fulfill the terms of his agreement with the Crusaders, by collecting money and making arrangements to submit to the papacy, but it quickly became clear that neither he nor the weakened empire had the resources to meet these responsibilities. The people of Constantinople became restive, and in January of 1204 a riot broke out in Constantinople, led in part by Alexios Doukas (known as Mourtzouflos), who advocated resistance to the Crusaders. Alexios IV was killed and his father died shortly thereafter in prison. Alexios V Doukas became emperor and began to strengthen the walls and to carry out raids against the Crusaders. Naturally enough this caused the Crusaders to plan an open attack against Constantinople, in this case not to install a pliable puppet emperor, but to take the city for themselves. In March 1204 they drew up a treaty (the so-called *Partitio Romaniae*) which provided a detailed plan for the division of the empire among the crusaders and the establishment of a Latin empire. The forces of Alexios V were able to defeat the first Crusader

## **Box 12.5 The Crusader States in the Thirteenth Century**

In the aftermath of the first three Crusades the states established in the Levant played an especially important role in Byzantine foreign policy and the course of events that led to the Fourth Crusade and its aftermath. These states, arguably the first European colonial entities, were largely inhabited by native people, that is, Muslims and Christians (many of them Orthodox) who had lived in the Near East before the beginning of the Crusades. But they were, of course, dominated by westerners, warriors who had come from various parts of Europe and who established feudal kingdoms and principalities in the territories they took from the Muslims. It is relatively easy to speak of the four most important of these states, all of which were founded at the time of the First Crusade (1096–9), but we should remember that the feudal nature of the Crusader holdings meant that there were many small principalities, duchies, and other holdings that often acted essentially independently of any higher authority. In addition, even the larger Crusader states were closely linked to Europe, either through family or political ties, and they often sought or were forced to make political alliances with local powers, both Christian and Muslim. Finally, from the perspective of the subject of this book, it should be remembered that the Byzantine Empire always made territorial claims for all of these areas, since it felt that they were taken from them by force at the time of the Arab expansion of the seventh century and that the Crusaders were legally and morally bound to return them to the emperors of Constantinople.

The following were the main Crusader states of the Levant.

### ***The Kingdom of Jerusalem***

Founded in 1099 and finally conquered in 1291, the kingdom of Jerusalem was undoubtedly the most important and most prestigious of the Crusader states. Godfrey of Bouillon, duke of Lorraine, was chosen as the first king, but he controlled little more than the city of Jerusalem itself, and there was initially some dissension among the leaders of the Crusade about his position. Godfrey, and his

brother Baldwin, who succeeded him in 1100, increased the size of the kingdom and divided it up into a series of counties (i.e., territories governed by a count), which were bound to the king by feudal responsibilities. After some military successes in the first half of the twelfth century Jerusalem was conquered by Saladin in 1187. After the end of the Third Crusade, when it was clear that Jerusalem would remain in Muslim hands, the remaining leaders of the kingdom retreated to the city of Acre, on the coast north of Jerusalem, and sought to stabilize their holdings. The kingdom continued to hold a narrow but long band of coastline, and it maintained a diplomatic presence that sought to sow disarray among the many Muslim principalities in the vicinity for nearly a century. In the thirteenth century, however, Mamluke power in Egypt attempted to rid the Near East of the Franks, and Acre was captured in 1291 and its population massacred, bringing an end to the kingdom and the last of the Crusader states.

### ***The County of Edessa***

The first Crusader state, the county of Edessa, was founded in 1098 and fell to the Muslims in 1144. It was the creation of Baldwin of Boulogne, who, along with the Norman Tancred, abandoned the crusading army on its way to Jerusalem and made a naked claim for land along the route. Baldwin seized control of the ancient city of Edessa in the north of Syria, which had been the focus of military activity between Byzantines and Arabs in the tenth century. When Baldwin became king of Jerusalem in 1100 the county passed to his cousin Baldwin II. The counts Joscelin I and Joscelin II were attacked by Zengi, the *atabeg* of Mosul and Aleppo, who took the city in 1144. Joscelin continued to hold some of his territories until his death in 1159, leaving them, theoretically, to the emperor Manuel I Komnenos, although they were then taken by Zengi's son Nur ad-Din the same year.

### ***The Principality of Antioch***

Founded in 1098 and conquered in 1268, the principality of Antioch was in many ways the most interesting of the Crusader states and one in which the Byzantines had the greatest interest. After the departure of Baldwin of Boulogne from the Crusader force, the main army moved south and, under the direction of Bohemund, began a siege of the ancient city of Antioch. Bohemund was the son and heir of Robert Guiscard, the Norman ruler of much of southern Italy, who had previously caused so much difficulty for Alexios Komnenos in Dalmatia. Anna Komnena described Bohemund as a person, "the likes of whom had never been seen in the Byzantine Empire." He took Antioch essentially by stratagem and defied the demands of Alexios I (and his own previous agreement) that the city be returned to Byzantium. Bohemund expanded his principality significantly, largely at the expense of the Byzantine Empire. A period of captivity at the hands of the Turks and defeats by the Byzantines caused Bohemund to visit Europe in search of funds and reinforcements. Interestingly enough, he ended up marrying the daughter of the French king Philip I and being given a force of some 34,000 soldiers. Instead of using this force in Antioch, however, he attacked the emperor Alexios, was defeated, and subjected to a humiliating treaty that required him to acknowledge the emperor as his sovereign (i.e., to admit that Antioch belonged rightfully to the Byzantine Empire). For a time Antioch was a possession of the kingdom of Jerusalem, but the regent Raymond of Poitiers's attack on Byzantine Asia Minor caused the emperor John Komnenos to intervene and in 1138 Raymond was forced to swear fealty to the empire. After the fall of Edessa in 1144, Manuel II Komnenos was again able to exercise the Byzantine right to the ownership of Antioch, and this undoubtedly contributed to the protection of the principality from the attacks of Nur ad-Din, until Manuel's death in 1180. Antioch took no part in the Third Crusade and the next half-century was characterized primarily by a conflict with the nearby territory of (Cilician) Armenia. In the end both principalities were engulfed in the wars between the Mongols and the Mamlukes and in 1268 Antioch fell to the great Mamluke sultan Baibars.

## *The County of Tripoli*

Founded in 1103, the county of Tripoli fell to the Muslims in 1289. The last of the Crusader states to be founded, Tripoli was something of an afterthought, as Raymond of Toulouse, one of the greatest of the Crusaders, determined that he should not be alone in failing to gain a territory for himself. He thus set his eyes on the great port of Tripoli, along the coast of what is now Lebanon. A great siege continued for some six years (during which Raymond died) but, with the fall of the city, all the coast of the Levant was in Crusader hands, and Tripoli linked the north (controlled by the Normans) to the south (controlled by the Franks). Theoretically a vassal of the kingdom of Jerusalem, Tripoli suffered from its relatively small size and nearly continuous in-fighting among its rulers. Although it long avoided the fate of its northern neighbors Edessa and Antioch, Tripoli eventually fell to the Mamlukes in 1289.

From the beginning the Crusader states were beset by attacks from the Seljuks and Fatimids, and even more by the essentially independent Muslim rulers of various Syrian cities. The Second Crusade (1147–9) was meant to relieve this pressure, but it met with defeat and the position of the Crusader holdings began to weaken. In the 1150s the kingdom of Jerusalem allied directly with the Byzantine emperor Manuel I. The situation changed significantly with the rise of Saladin and his ability to unite many of the disparate Muslims of the Levant. The Third Crusade (1189–91) was launched in reaction to Saladin's power and his conquest of Jerusalem, but it accomplished nothing. The crusading leaders left the Holy Land immediately and Saladin died shortly thereafter and his alliance fell into disarray. The westerners failed to take advantage of Muslim weakness after Saladin's death, but the moment was lost and the great days of the Crusader states were essentially over. The northern "Norman" principalities of Edessa and Antioch faced the local power of the *atabeg* Zengi and his successors, coupled with the hostility of the emperors John and Manuel Komnenos. Jerusalem and Tripoli lasted longer (although the city of Jerusalem fell at an early date) but later Crusades (from the Fourth Crusade onward), sent out presumably to reconquer Jerusalem, had virtually no impact on the Holy Land.

The Crusades, and more importantly, the Crusader states ironically provided a counter to the collapse of the Abbasid caliphate and the emergence of local splinter states in many parts of the Near East. The career and unifying power of Saladin, for example, was in large part a reaction to the presence of the Crusader states in the Holy Land. Thus, the creation of the Ayyubid and Fatimid dynasties, and ultimately that of Mamluke Egypt, led to Muslim unity, which was a strong force against the power of the Mongols in the thirteenth century, and (not least) an inspiration for Arab unity in more modern times.

attack on April 9, 1204, but on April 12, the Crusaders broke into the Golden Horn and attacked the weaker Sea Walls along the northern side of the city. Despite significant resistance, the Crusaders forced an entry, and Alexios V fled the city. There followed a savage sack of Constantinople, which was at the time still one of the richest cities of the world, and innumerable treasures, books, and works of art were wantonly destroyed. In the carnage many of the manuscripts, Christian relics, and sculptures that had been assembled by the emperors, from the time of Constantine the Great onward, were destroyed, or in some few cases transported back to the West, primarily to Venice.

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